

WE ARE CO-MISSIONED

(10/02/2022)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 6:1-13

“He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.” (Mark 6:7)

Today is a special day for me and, I hope, a special day in the life of First Community Church. Today, on Re-Covenanting Sunday, a day when we renew our commitment our covenant with God, with this church, and with each other, it is also the twenty-fifth anniversary of my call to be the settled pastor of this church.

I don't know where the time went! We have been a part of each other's lives in a deep and meaningful way for a quarter century! We have walked the same uncertain path, not alone but with each other, the journey to discern what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be a Christian church in today's world, and how to live this out in our little corner of the world—an especially difficult task during the coronavirus pandemic. We have grown together in the faith. Darlene and I have been deeply shaped by our love of this little church and our relationships with all of you.

Some time ago, Martha Hubley asked me why a minister “with so many capital letters after his name” would accept a call to serve this little church. I thought that was cute: having “so many capital letters” after my name. The answer is simple: I believe I was called. “Call” is not a word I use lightly. In my own experience, I am more apt to describe a decision as a call when it just doesn't make sense. My participation in the March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 was one such experience. Leaving Pilgrim Church, which I loved, fifty years ago to serve as chaplain to Foxborough State Hospital was another. My decision to come to this church instead of churches where the Pastor had a bigger office and his own personal parking place was a third.

After having served as a supply preacher in the summer of 1997, I realized that I did not want to be considered as your interim minister but as your settled pastor. I sensed that there was something special about this church. There was a spirit in this church, a spirit not only of friendliness and hospitality but also of faith and mission. What I found puzzling was that a cursory glance at the list of clergypersons who have served this church over the last 157 years, most for only one or two years, would lead one to conclude that the remarkable spirit of this church is not attributable to any one pastor. It certainly is not attributable to me since it was already here when I arrived!

I believe that the spirit of this church, which so many people in our community recognize and celebrate, is attributable to our lay people. Our church is special because we have parishioners who understand not only what it means to be a disciple, but also what it means to be an apostle. This spirit has been transmitted in some strange way from generation to generation. A quantum physicist might speak of a quantum energy field in our church that persists over time. The Book of Revelation, more poetically, would attribute it to what John called the “angel” of

this church. It could also be that our church only attracts a certain kind of parishioner. I suspect this is a factor because when I think of the people who have become an integral part of this church over the past twenty-five years, they invariably fit the mold.

Let's get back to the matter of what it means to be a disciple and what it means to be an apostle in the light of today's scripture lesson from the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus embarks upon his ministry of teaching and healing in the region where he grew up. Those who hear him are impressed. They ask, "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him?"

The people of Jesus' hometown are not only impressed; they are skeptical. They say, "It can't be! We know this man as a carpenter." They know him as the son of Mary, the brother of James, Joses, Judas, Simon, and several unnamed sisters. Joseph, Jesus' father, is not mentioned; according to legend, he died when Jesus was young.

The people of Jesus' hometown are actually a little more than skeptical. They "take offense" at him. They are not only incredulous; they harbor negative feelings toward him. I suspect that who he is and what he teaches challenges their worldview. Their anger is a manifestation of their resistance to change, their resistance to new ideas, their resistance to a new revelation of God.

Jesus is not taken aback by their hostility. He does not get defensive. He just goes on doing what he is doing. He does, however, "marvel at their unbelief." Mark notes that, because of their unbelief, "no mighty works were accomplished in that region." Our faith has a lot to do with the miracles that are experienced by us, in us, and through us.

After his unpleasant encounter with those who might have been expected to welcome him with open arms, Jesus expands his ministry. He "calls to him the twelve." He invites them to accompany him, to assist him in his work. He then sends them out "two by two."

There is a difference between a disciple and an apostle. A disciple is a follower. A disciple commits him/herself to a certain discipline, in this case a spiritual discipline. The disciples follow Jesus. They accompany him on his journey. They are students. They learn from his words and his actions.

Along the way, the disciples become apostles. Apostles are entrusted with a mission. They minister on behalf of their Lord. They transmit his teaching to others. They carry on his healing work in the world. They labor in the vineyards on behalf of their Lord, as an extension of his ministry. Apostles are basically ministers.

Jesus selects twelve disciples. As we know, twelve is what we would call an archetypal number. There are twelve signs in the zodiac, twelve tribes of Israel, and twelve months in the

year. It was also Gil McDougald's number, but that's not the point. Twelve is a number signifying wholeness. When Judas dies following his betrayal, the disciples elect someone to take his place. They invite Matthias to join them. Now the archetypal number twelve, the symbol of wholeness, has been restored.

Jesus invites the twelve to accompany him, to learn from him. When he feels they have reached a certain level of understanding, a certain level of spiritual maturity, he commissions them as apostles. He sends them out on a mission, on his mission. This is what it means to be commissioned: to be involved in co-mission, mission with, mission in partnership with the one who commissions us.

One does not stop being a disciple when one becomes an apostle, because the apostle continues to learn. Jesus continues to instruct his followers to the very last moments he is with them on earth in his human form. In his commission, he gives them authority over unclean spirits, over malign, destructive forces within the psyche. He helps them to become aware of a power within them that they did not know they possessed. He tells them they will do great things on his behalf.

As promised, the apostles go on to do miraculous healings in the name and Spirit of their Lord. They preach what Jesus preached. Note that they don't ask people to believe in Jesus or become his disciple. They don't ask people to worship Jesus. They don't proclaim Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, at least in the Gospel of Mark. This was not what Jesus wanted.

According to Mark, the apostles call their listeners to repent, to straighten out those parts of their life that have gone astray, to cast aside the idols that they have placed in the center of their life. They tell people about the kingdom of God that Jesus preached and incarnated. They participate in Jesus' healing ministry. They anoint the sick with oil. They cast out demons. This is evangelism at its best!

Like the original twelve, we are called to be disciples, followers of the spiritual discipline or path that is called the Way. We gather in this church to learn more about Jesus, about his teaching, about the kingdom of God that is both within us and among us. As disciples, we should never stop learning and growing, never stop trying to deepen our faith.

Like the original twelve, we are also called to be apostles. We are co-missioned by our Lord to carry on his ministry, to incarnate his presence in the world. He lives in the world through us. It will not do to protest that we feel inadequate to the task. His Spirit will inform us, will form us, and will strengthen us spiritually. It has the power to heal us, to restore us, to make us whole. It then flows through us to others and to the world.

We may not feel worthy to be disciples, let alone apostles. We should remember that the original twelve probably felt as we do. They were ordinary, everyday people. They had their

problems, their shortcomings, but they stepped forward in response to the invitation. This is what changed their lives.

Like the original twelve, we have a need to be healed. However, this does not have to become an impediment to our ministry. We are called to be what the Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen called “wounded healers.” We are not perfect, but we are on our way. On our way, we do what we can for others.

Ernest Hemingway once said, “Sooner or later, life breaks us all, but many become strong in the broken places.” There are many ways to be broken. There is one way to be healed. As we recall from the accounts of healing in the Gospel of Mark: the healing of the woman who was bleeding and the restoration of life to the daughter of Jairus, we are healed when we touch Jesus, when we are touched by his Spirit, by his presence.

Note that Jesus, whom I have always viewed as an introvert, doesn’t work alone; he calls people to share in his work. We should also note that, according to scripture, he delegates; he trusts his followers; he does not micromanage them. It is because of this that I don’t believe that God is a control freak, that God micromanages the universe and our lives. I believe God gives us the freedom to do what we will with our lives, hoping that we will do what we know deep down is right.

To delegate is to empower the person to whom you delegate. Jesus empowers his disciples by calling them to be apostles. The apostles, who are not highly qualified or fully trained, are initially not up to the task. They sometimes fail in their attempts to heal. When this happens, they come back to Jesus and ask him what they did wrong. They learn as they go along. Because Jesus trusts them, they begin to trust themselves.

As you will note from your Sunday bulletin, I am the Pastor of this church, but I am not the only minister. The members of this congregation are the ministers, the apostles. I am here for you. You are here for me. We are here for each other. And we are here for the world--as apostles and partners in the ministry that is entrusted to us.

The Protestant reformer Martin Luther spoke of the “priestly and pastoral functions of all believers.” I may be called to ordained ministry, to the ministry of Word and sacrament, but we are all called to a common vocation. We are called to be apostles, to carry on our Lord’s ministry in our little corner of the world.

If we can realize this, then, like the disciples when they became apostles, we may glimpse the extraordinary dimensions of our very ordinary lives. When we do this, we realize and incarnate God’s kingdom within ourselves. Then we can bring it or help to incarnate it in our little corner of the world. As the medieval German mystic, Meister Eckhart, has said,

A pear seed grows into a pear tree, and a hazelnut seed grows into a hazelnut tree, and a seed of God grows into God. God does not ask anything else of you but to let yourself go and let God be God in you.

In the little moments of our daily lives in the week to come, let us seek the opportunity to become healers. We may be able to bring a kind word, a healing word, a caring presence to someone in need. When we do this, we are functioning not only as disciples, but also apostles. When we move outside ourselves to truly care about our brothers and sisters who are in need, we are letting ourselves go that God might become God in us, and then through us to the world.

We do this as individuals. We also do this in many ways as a church, as a community of faith. What we have, what we have that makes us special, is not institutionalized, nor is it clergy dependent. It is an expression and an experience of spirit, a spirit that transforms people who become a part of this fellowship and then, through them, transforms our little corner of the world.

We have this spirit because so many people over the 157 years of our existence have committed themselves to be not only disciples but also apostles. We have this because so many people in the history of this church have been able to let go, to let their personal ego dissolve into something bigger, and to let God be God through them and through this little church.

We have a lot to celebrate. We also have a lot of work to do. Now let us receive and share with each other the sacrament of presence, the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

The First Community Church of Southborough

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